

Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids McKinley County

Carol Burnett was attending a birthday party when a mother told her about her son's daily salad report. When she comes home from work, he is so excited to tell her which kind of Burnett's pre-packaged salads he ate at his elementary school that day.

"Just hearing that, you know you've touched one kid. They are making better choices," said Burnett, who implemented healthy salads as nutrition specialist for Gallup-McKinley County Schools. "I think if the children can make better choices, the parents will learn to also."

Students and staff love eating the different salads offered a few times a week, including chef, grilled chicken, taco and popcorn-chicken salads. Unlike a lot of school meals, the students don't throw away much.

The school district may be the only one in New Mexico offering pre-made salads as reimbursable lunches – which means they meet the national nutrition requirements to receive federal money. It is rare for elementary schools to offer a second entrée as an option.



Key Community Successes

October 2011 - June 2013

- 4 Gallup McKinley County Schools (GMCS) elementary schools and 177 third grade students participated in the 5.2.1.0 Challenge this past year
- Updated school district wellness policy to include language around healthy eating and physical activity
- Expanded the number of school gardens from 2 to 9
- Developed a community garden with community pantry and nearby farm
- Offered pre-made salads as reimbursable lunches in all 19 GMCS elementary schools
- Implemented fruit smoothie initiative in 4 elementary schools
- Held monthly family food nights at 2 elementary schools
- Expanded farmer's market and Community-Supported Agriculture programs to include more growers and quantity of food offered
- Began trail development throughout the community and conducted walkability assessments on paths connecting schools to neighborhoods

Community transformation in Gallup McKinley has, to date, reached 100% of GMCS elementary schools (5,078 students) primarily through healthy eating initiatives.

Cafeteria staff are making and serving about 1,300 salads each week at all 19 elementary schools, according to Burnett.

“For a lot of kids, this is their only meal,” Burnett said. “We are trying to teach them to make healthier choices, and we don’t know what choices they have at home.”

The healthy addition to school food in McKinley County is one small piece of the Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County Initiative. The initiative, supported by Healthy Kids New Mexico, is making changes where children live, play and learn so it is easier for them and their families to choose healthy foods and be physically active.

In northwestern New Mexico, Gallup is the largest city in McKinley County. It is a rural community near the Navajo Nation, and its ethnic distribution is more diverse than many New Mexico towns, with a majority of American Indians, followed by one-third Hispanic, 22 percent Caucasian and a minority mix of other cultures like Middle Eastern. The area is rich with culture, arts and outdoor recreation, but the community also has one of the state’s highest diabetes and obesity rates.

Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County is working to curb those rates with a comprehensive, multi-sector approach that includes school and community gardens, a farmer’s market, local food buying programs, healthy foods in schools, walking school buses, community trails and school wellness policies.

To expand nutritious options at schools, Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County offers fruit smoothies as alternatives to pickles, popcorn and nachos that are sold as fundraisers. In high school, smoothies are another option to supplement the grab-n-go breakfast of plastic-wrapped sausage. Healthy Kids trained students and staff how to make smoothies and applied for a national grant so four elementary classrooms could have free smoothies for breakfast every day for a month.

It became a smoothie revolution -- a program so popular that now students make smoothies at home; local and national organizations donated blenders to the cause; one school racked up at least \$2,000 in smoothie sales; Hiroshi Miyamura High School sold 600 smoothies a week. Healthy Kids tied the smoothies to nutrition education and the smoothie sales to school gardens, helping students buy plants they can grow with their school’s proceeds. The alternative High School sold 500 plants to school gardens at \$5 each.



Smoothies with spinach, kiwi, bananas, pineapple and ginger

“The more you involve students, the more they get comfortable with fresh fruits,” said Joshua Kanter, a Food Corps member who works on the Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County Initiative. “Being comfortable will probably give them a license to try new things. If you’ve never seen it, never touched it and don’t know it’s name, you probably won’t put it in your mouth. But they are probably going to want to taste it if they have a hand in creating it.”

The key to working with the Gallup–McKinley County Schools has been the ongoing relationship Karl Lohmann has cultivated over the years, as a health advocate and as an elementary-school teacher years ago. Lohmann coordinates the Healthy Kids initiative and is director of the Boys and Girls Club of NM-Gallup and Gallup Youth Conservation Corps.

“Karl never puts us down and has always been there as a positive person or a positive pusher in order to keep things going,” Burnett said with a laugh. “He’s always supported us, and we try to support him as much as we can.”

Lohmann said he attends school board meetings to praise the food-services staff when he learns of healthy strategies like getting rid of deep-fat fryers in all schools.

The food-services staff “was pleased that we were attentive to bad practices and supportive of good practices,” he said.

In addition to creating healthier options for students, Lohmann and his coalition of health advocates started working with the school district to update the wellness policy, which hadn’t been a school district focus for years.

Carmen Moffett, Director of Indian Education and supervisor of school nurses, took the lead in what became one of the most all-inclusive, systemic examinations of a school wellness policy. She brought together parents who were active in the schools, high school students, community leaders and other school officials to develop a vision for the health of their schools.

To encourage attendance at Saturday meetings, she provides a small stipend to reimburse parents and students for traveling long distances throughout the Navajo Nation. One family comes from Crownpoint about 45 minutes away; another family comes from Navajo Pine High School 60 miles away.

“Line by line, word by word, we talked about everything so it would be meaningful for us,” Moffett said. “We have not dug deep into the wellness policy the way we are now. As we go through this journey of revising and making recommendations to strengthen it, we are also talking about implementation.”

Recommended policy changes include prohibiting carbonated and energy drinks on any school campus, encouraging structured physical activity daily, selling healthy food options during fundraisers, and restricting the fat, sugar and calorie contents of food sold.

“We want to examine whether the policy is being implemented with fidelity and whether it’s having an impact,” Moffett said. “We hope our kids will show that they are healthier.”

Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County work with the schools has been extensive and also involves creating school gardens and increasing physical activity opportunities for students.

Lohmann and his Healthy Kids volunteer crew developed walking school buses in which students walk with volunteer adults to school from designated points. They installed fitness trails at all elementary schools and are building trails that connect schools to neighborhoods.

“I have trained a team that goes into neighborhoods and looks at walking hazards and tries to eliminate them so kids who want to walk to school can,” he said.



Juan de Onate school garden and hoop house



Selling fresh produce at the market

Nine schools have gardens, and four schools have hoop houses that extend the growing season and produce such vegetables as bok choy, lettuce, green mixes, beets, broccoli and carrots. Healthy Kids reaches into the community too, adding a large community garden and expanding the local community-supported agriculture program about ten times in the amount of food and the number of people who commit to buying boxes of local fresh produce, Lohmann said. The farmer’s market has also expanded to include more growers selling their fruits and vegetables.

Lohmann is quick to point out that the Healthy Kids Healthy McKinley County Initiative has involved numerous players, including a strong health coalition representing a broad base of community members.

“We’ve got this philosophy that place matters,” he said. “It means your zip code has a lot to do with the kind of access you have to good health care, good food and safe places to play. We are trying to create health policies and a physical environment that would give you access to a healthy lifestyle.”